DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 431 SO 033 959

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TITLE	Petition of Amelia Bloomer Regarding Suffrage in the West. The Constitution Community: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861).
INSTITUTION	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	9p.; Photographic image of primary source may not reproduce adequately.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408. For full text: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/bloomer_suffrage_petition/teaching_activitie s.html.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; *Activism; *Gender Issues; Intermediate Grades; National Standards; *Primary Sources; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Student Research; Teacher Developed Materials; *United States History; *Voting Rights; Womens History
IDENTIFIERS	*Bloomer (Amelia); National Civics and Government Standards; National History Standards; Nineteenth Amendment; *Womens Suffrage

ABSTRACT

In the mid-19th century people believed religious, moral, social, or political perfection was obtainable, not unlike Mrs. Amelia Bloomer. Bloomer's battles reflected and influenced gender roles in the 19th century as the United States debated social reforms and constitutional rights, such as the right to petition and the right to vote, among others. Bloomer ultimately succeeded in making her mark as suffragist, editor, and temperance leader, but to many of her contemporaries she was most associated with the Bloomer costume (man-like trousers under a shorter-than-fashionable skirt). Amelia Bloomer's newspaper, "The Lily," once a voice for rational dress reform, advanced the objectives of the women's movement. In 1871 she became president of the Iowa Women's Suffrage Society and supported a legal code that ended the distinction between male and female property rights. She exercised her First Amendment right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. In 1920, the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution brought what she had hoped: a public policy of equality of suffrage for women and men. Six diverse teaching activities are suggested and a copy of Mrs. Bloomer's 1878 petition regarding suffrage in the west is provided. (BT)

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ED 466 431

National Archives and Records Administration

THE CONSTITUTION COMMUNITY

Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

Petition of Amelia Bloomer Regarding Suffrage in the West

By Linda Simmons

SO 033 959

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http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/bloomer_suffrage_petition/bloomer_suffrage_petition.html

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2002

The Constitution Community is a partnership between classroom teachers and education specialists from the National Archives and Records Administration. We are developing lessons and activities that address constitutional issues, correlate to national academic standards, and encourage the analysis of primary source documents. The lessons that have been developed are arranged according to historical period.

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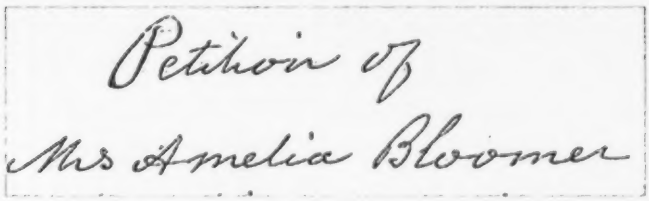
Petition of Amelia Bloomer Regarding Suffrage in the West



Constitutional Connection

This lesson relates to the expression of First Amendment rights, including speech and petition, to the expansion of suffrage by means of the 19th Amendment, and to the amendment process described in Article V .

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

Era 4 -Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

- **Standard 4C** -Demonstrate understanding of changing gender roles and the ideas and activities of women reformers.

This lesson correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

Standard III.E.1. -Evaluate, take and defend positions about how the public agenda is set.

Standard V.E.3. --Evaluate, take and defend positions about the means that citizens should use to monitor and influence the formation and implementation of public policy.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share this assignment with colleagues who teach government, history, and any course that requires students to learn research skills using Internet sources and primary sources.

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List of Documents

1. Petition from Mrs. Amelia Bloomer of Council Bluffs, Iowa, Regarding Suffrage in the West, 1878 .

Historical Background

Mid-19th century America was in some respects an age of perfectionism. People believed religious, moral, social, or political perfection was obtainable. Many different reform causes attracted dedicated adherents. Mental health. Temperance. Education. Abolition. Utopian socialism. Diet. Seances. Fashion. Suffrage. Less serious issues competed with the more serious for a place on the public policy agenda. Disparate efforts under the umbrella of reform were united by one overriding goal: to assure that American reality matched American ideals. American women were leaders in reform movements. Some made names for themselves espousing particular reforms, while others supported a host of different reforms. Dorothea Dix dedicated her life to improve the care of the insane. Sarah and Angelina Grimke crusaded for abolition. Lydia Maria Child wrote about the right of a married woman to make a will. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the dramatic Seneca Falls Convention. Into this scene stepped Amelia Bloomer. Before she exited, she would affect popular culture and the public agenda.

Bloomer's battles both reflected and influenced gender roles in the 19th century as America debated social reforms and constitutional rights: the right to petition, the right to vote , among others. An avid volunteer, Bloomer challenged the existing social and political culture. She led a civic life that affected the nation's public agenda. She would shape and be shaped by political institutions, the media, and individual reformers with whom she shared the stage.

Ultimately, Bloomer made her mark as suffragist, editor, and temperance leader, but to many of her contemporaries she was most associated with the so-called Bloomer costume. Bloomers, actually man-like trousers underneath a shorter-than-fashionable skirt, fit "The Move Toward Rational Dress." The reaction hardly seemed rational. Fashion reformers touted the bloomers as a way to "physically and spiritually free women of the cumbersome hoop." They argued that the costume was economical since it required less fabric than traditional frocks, was comfortable to wear, and was "conducive to health, by the avoidance of damp skirts hanging about the feet and ank[l]es since they would be clad in a boot." As a later historian wrote, "Hers was a spirited effort to free women from their voluminous and constricting haberdashery: heavy skirts raking the muck of the streets, multiple petticoats, bustles, miscellaneous padding, and lung crushing whalebone-all told, some fifteen pounds."

This photograph was taken c. 1918. It is of some of the employees of the Hope Webbing Company; all of whom are wearing bloomers. (photo citation number NWDNS-165-WW-229D(50).

Critics charged that the women were unsexing themselves, costuming themselves as men, forgetting their femininity. However loud the criticism, Bloomer continued to wear her bloomers for six or eight years, even as others gave up the fashion. The Bloomer costume certainly marked a significant achievement in her life as a social reformer. Bloomer herself was no single-issue person. She had been paying attention to other reforms of the era. At the age of 30, Bloomer witnessed, although she did not actively participate in, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, the launch of the suffrage movement that culminated in the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The Seneca Falls meeting convened against a social background that offered plenty of work for women reformers.

The setting and the conference moved Bloomer toward action, if somewhat slowly. Her newspaper, *The Lily* , once a voice for rational dress reform, ultimately advanced the prime objectives of the women's movement. The paper, she wrote, was "a needed instrument to spread abroad the truth of a new gospel to woman, and I could not withhold my hand to stay the work I had begun." She had started the paper in 1849 in Seneca Falls to focus on temperance. In fact, the full name of the newspaper was *The Lily: A Ladies' Journal, devoted to Temperance and Literature* .

Bloomer's early reform focus resulted in part from the changing immigration patterns affecting American life. The immigration boom of the early 19th century brought not only new populations of Germans, Irish, and other Europeans but also new dietary customs, including beer and hard liquor. As women reformers spoke out and wrote about the need for temperance, their critics responded by suggesting that women should keep silent, adhering to the 19th century notion that public speaking fell into the prerogative of men, not women. Should women keep silence on what many considered a moral issue, moral since women often bore the brunt of drunken men's behavior? Bloomer responded clearly: "None of woman's business, when she is subject to poverty and degradation and made an outcast from respectable society! None of woman's business, when her starving naked babes are compelled to suffer the horrors of the winter's blast! . . . In the name of all that is sacred, what is woman's business if this be no concern of hers ?"

In temperance reform as in fashion reform, Bloomer's work fit the mode of the early 19th century reform movement. Yet her work revealed the divisions among the advocates standing under that umbrella of reform. Bloomer, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw her, represented a conservative stance. In a letter to Susan B. Anthony, Stanton wrote that Anthony must "take Mrs. Bloomer's suggestions with great caution, for she has not the spirit of the reformer." Anthony remembered Bloomer from the Seneca Falls convention where "she stood aloof and laughed at us. It was only with great effort and patience that she has been brought up to her present position. In her paper, she will not speak against the fugitive slave law, nor in her work to put down intemperance will she criticize the equivocal position of the church."

But Bloomer changed into a reformer of whom Stanton could approve. Later, *The Lily* educated its audience about women's issues, served as a model for other suffrage publications, and published Elizabeth Cady Stanton's pieces. Some historians credit it as the first newspaper in the United States owned and operated by a woman. In any case, its pages proved a boon to women seeking to publish addresses and essays in support of suffrage for women. She sold it when in 1854 she moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa, with her husband of 14 years, Dexter Chamberlain Bloomer, whom she had not promised to "obey." Moving west, she packed her reform impulses along with her material possessions. Like many reformers, she sought improvement in many areas of American life. In Council Bluffs, she worked to establish churches, Good Templar lodges (a reform fraternal organization similar to the Masons), suffrage legislation, and the Soldiers' Aid Society. In 1871 she became president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Society and supported a legal code that ended the distinction between male and female property rights.

From Iowa, Bloomer exercised her First Amendment right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. In 1878, she wrote the 45th Congress petitioning for relief from the burden of taxation or for the "removal of her political disabilities." The archival record "Petition from Mrs. Amelia Bloomer of Council Bluffs, Iowa Regarding Suffrage in the West, 1878," is that petition. Here she acted as the single author of a petition. Other women sent similar petitions, some writing on their own, others as members of organizations. Bloomer's words in this petition echo the sentiments expressed in the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration: "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."

She did not stop there. She continued to speak and write, advocating "Woman's Right to the Ballot." In an essay of that title, she wrote that women and men had equal claims to "the enjoyment of all these rights which God and nature have bestowed upon the race." "Woman," she wrote, "is entitled to the same means of enforcing those rights as man; and that therefore she should be heard in the formation of Constitutions, in the making of the laws, and in the selection of those by whom the laws are administered."

By now, Bloomer and other women had learned the necessity of political organization. They had a broad range of tactics: they lobbied, they marched, they protested, and they

engaged in peaceful and not so peaceful civil disobedience. And they developed the necessary forms for soliciting support. A political network had been born, as shown by the form letter Stanton and her associates developed to ask friends to send in petitions. Bloomer's speaking and writing in the late 19th century echoed the spirit of perfectionism that had set the scene for her work in designing fashion to free women; her work now suggested that the public policies expanding suffrage, not the Bloomer costume, would free women. In 1920, the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution brought what she had hoped: a public policy of equality of suffrage for women and men. Only one of the women who had attended the Seneca Falls Convention, Charlotte Woodward, was alive to vote for the president in 1920.

Teaching Activities

1. Distribute the copy of the petition Amelia Bloomer wrote to Congress or assign students to locate it using the NAIL database and copies of a biographical entry for Bloomer such as the one in *Notable American Women* . Direct students to read the petition. Instruct students to complete this in-class writing assignment : Write an epitaph for Amelia Jenks Bloomer. The epitaph should capture Bloomer's role as a reformer of American political culture.

2. Discuss with students the factors of political socialization: family, peers, education, media, and specific events. Assign students to read one or more of the following: (a.) the appropriate assignments in the standard text, such as "Civil Rights and Public Policy" or the section of an American history text that deals with 19th century reforms; (b.) the Historical Background section of this article; or (c.) the entry for Amelia Jenks Bloomer found in *Notable American Women* . In class, ask students to complete this assignment: Draw an image (cartoon or graphic) that depicts the factors of political socialization that affected Mrs. Bloomer. Allow 10 minutes. Allow students to exchange drawings and identify and discuss the factors of political socialization that they believe led Amelia Bloomer into a role as a reformer.

3. Ask students to examine Bloomer's petition and U.S. history and U.S. government texts to identify the various issues that were competing to be on the public agenda in the first half and the last half of the 1800s. Ask students to self-select teams of four students each: Team A to research U. S. history texts for the early 1800s; Team B to research U.S. government texts for the early 1800s; Team C to research U.S. history texts for the late 1800s; Team D to research U. S. Government texts for the late 1800s. Ask students to create a database that shows their findings. The data should include the role of political leaders, role of political institutions, role of political parties, role of interest groups, role of the media, and role of individual citizens. Submit the database to be added to those available to students for research in the school library.

4. Assign students, working in teams, this research project: Create an annotated webliography of sources (a bibliography of Web sites) about Amelia Bloomer that would be useful to study the role of political reformers. Students must use three different types of search tools to locate information on Amelia Bloomer. One must be a search engine,

such as Infoseek; the second must be a metadata search engine, such as Webcrawler; the third must be a subject directory such as Librarians' Index to the Internet. The entries in the webliography must be annotated bibliographical citations that follow the format that MLA provides for online sources. The annotations should provide information that helps a reader understand the value of the site, such as the authority of the author, the point of view of the site, and the frequency that the site is updated. In class, direct teams to exchange annotated webliographies and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each.

5. Maintain the student teams that constructed the annotated webliographies (activity 4). Direct each team to write a dialogue in which two community college professors discuss the role that Amelia Bloomer played in the reform themes of the 19th century. Teams should draft and revise dialogues out of class, taking care to follow MLA standards of documentation. Ask one representative from each group to play the part of scholarly expert on the reformer, and conduct a panel discussion with questions from the audience.

6. Supervise students as they complete this assignment as a long-term, out-of-class exam project. Ask students to select one of these options: (a.) Design an exhibit to showcase the role that Amelia Bloomer or another reformer played in the 19th century; (b.) Write a script for an audiotape that will showcase her role as a reformer in the 19th century. The script must be documented, following MLA standards. After completing the script, record it, using as many sound effects as appropriate to convey the message of her role; (c.) Create a web page for Amelia Bloomer or another woman reformer.

The document included in this project is from Record Group 233, Records of the United States House of Representatives. It is available online through the National Archives Information Locator (NAIL) database, control number NWL-233-324. Addititional documents related to woman suffrage are available in the NAIL Database. Try searching NAIL using keywords such as "Elizabeth Cady Stanton," "Susan B. Anthony," and " Lucy Stone." NAIL is a searchable database that contains information about a wide variety of NARA holdings across the country. You can use NAIL to search record descriptions by keywords or topics and retrieve digital copies of selected textual documents, photographs, maps, and sound recordings related to thousands of topics.

This article was written by Linda Simmons, an associate professor at Northern Virginia Community College in Manassas, VA.

Petition of

Mrs Amelia Bloomer for relief from taxation or political disabilities.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, in Congress Assembled.

Mrs Amelia Bloomer, a citizen of the United States, and a resident of Council Bluffs, County of Pottawattamie and State of Iowa - the owner of real and personal property amounting to several thousand dollars, on which she is taxed without representation, hereby respectfully petitions your Honorable Body for relief from this burden of taxation - or for the removal of her political disabilities, and that She may be declared invested with full power to exercise her right of self-government at the ballot-box - all State constitutions, or Statute laws to the contrary notwithstanding.

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